



Higher Education in Times of Instability and Disruption: Rethinking Notions of Values, Value Creation and Instructional Practices in Vietnam and Beyond

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The disruptive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a massive shift in instructional practices in higher education across the globe. The impact of this pandemic on education globally has led to a surge in online teaching and the use of various digital technologies and platforms to support instructional practices. However, this world-changing event has foregrounded the limitations of technology in addition to other important indications, particularly as it relates to the notion of value and by extension value creation. Within the context of the Vietnamese higher education ecosystem, what is evident is that a re-evaluation of values is worth considering, in terms of the value of local higher education institutions, in addition to the value creation produced by the same. This article will engage with pertinent implications for the post-COVID realities which offer untold challenges and opportunities in Vietnam and elsewhere. Moreover, the post-COVID realities of late modernity only serve to accentuate the importance of values and value creation in this context as higher education institutions would re-evaluate, rethink, and retool approaches to instructional practices. A focus on questions of value aids in considering the broader conditions and contexts which support some of the fruitful and situated outcomes of higher education which includes human capital development, employment, social mobility and the production of modern social identities.

Keywords: higher education, teaching and learning, values, value creation, COVID-19, Vietnam, modernity and education, modernisation

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has done more than disrupt the course of contemporary life, but in effect has opened generated a new epoch within late modernity known as the post-COVID world (MacMullin et al., 2020; Tumlinson et al., 2020; Wagner, 2020; Zahra, 2020). In such a world, novelty, fear, unpredictability also exist alongside opportunity, evolution and soberness, in unusual measures of intensity (Wagner, 2020; Zahra, 2020). Experts have noted the greater importance given to digital technologies in this new post-COVID reality (MacMullin et al., 2020), in addition to the greater measure of creativity, problem-solving, and rethinking of social systems which existed before

the advent of the pandemic (Tumlinson et al., 2020). Higher education, like all other levels of education, is also in need of rethinking, problem-solving, and creativity as observed by several academics in the field (Korkmaz and Toraman, 2020; Peters et al., 2020). This is important given that instructional practices are in large part the essential work of colleges and universities worldwide.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a massive increase in online teaching through the use of various digital technologies and platforms, this world-changing event has foregrounded the limitations of technology in addition to other important implications. These limitations have to do with the ways in which technology use in education, have been heralded by pre-pandemic futurists as having a near salvific role in universally elevating education standards (Feenberg, 2015; Wheelan, 2016; Aldama, 2018; Herman, 2020). However, technology in this context can only do so much for us.

The experience of COVID-19 has taught the world that technology brings maximum benefit once issues of suitability, access, and disciplinarity among other factors are taken into account (Feenberg, 2003; Feenberg, 2005). As educators the world over rethink instructional practices and disciplinarity, the use of technology during the pandemic and the post-COVID world has been more out of necessity and desperation rather than a calculated ideal (Korkmaz and Toraman, 2020; Pham and Ho, 2020). Amidst the unpredictability, desperation, and confusion of this post-COVID reality, I argue that one of the key implications which came to the fore as a result of the global pandemic is the question of values. In what follows, I would like to divert attention away from educational technology in higher education to a discussion on values and implications for classroom instruction.

Values here refers to priorities and principles which function as a means of navigating the shared social worlds that people inhabit in both their material and immaterial realities (Bergan and Damian, 2010). These negotiated priorities serve as a foundation for the self-regulating behaviours of individuals and shared paradigms which enable collective action and sustained activity (Shaker and Plater, 2016). As such, *values* may be identified as systemic, rule-based perceptions which may accord with personal convictions or affirmative interests, which in turn mobilises and legitimises discourses and practice (Han, 2019).

As an extension of this definition of values, the notion of *value creation* involves more contingent and tangible outcomes that rely to capacity building and innovation (Kettunen et al., 2013; Aldama, 2018). Within the context of higher education instructional practices, authentic assessment and independent learning, for example, are both core values and discourses which in large part relate to questions of value and value creation given the social function of higher education within modern societies (Giloi and Du Toit, 2013; Ajjawi et al., 2020). However, instructional practices cannot be divorced from questions of value and value creation, in addition to conditions and contexts which allow for such practices to provide fruitful

gains to the wider scope of societies beyond the walls of the academy.

Higher Education Within the Vietnamese Context

Values and value creation are almost always a highly contextual matter, with value systems varying based on factors of locality and cultural difference. This is true all over the world, and with Vietnam as a particular example, as the embrace of deeply stratified value systems, such as Confucianism, Socialism, and Neoliberalism penetrate all aspects of local society, with education being no different (Nguyen, 2016; Tran et al., 2017; Phan and Doan, 2020). I advance that the value of higher education institutions lies in the value such institutions provide students and society at large, but also how students are socialised as agents of value creation within or through the academy, in an effort to be able to produce value outside of it.

Higher education institutions in Vietnam are tasked with addressing issues of efficiency with their operations as well as how their work maintains pertinency within varying spheres of national life. Some of these challenges have been highlighted in previous studies related to the value of human capital in the form of returning graduates from foreign institutions (Molla and Pham, 2019; Pham, 2019, 2020), the educational reforms both nationally and regionally (Hirosato and Kitamura, 2009), the impact of globalisation and local social conditions on the education sector in general (London, 2011; Chalapati et al., 2015; Tran and Marginson, 2018), and role of student identity in being a dominant force in the development of the higher education sector (Tran, 2013a; Tran, 2015; Phan, 2017).

Institutions of higher education function as important social organisations within societies across the globe, operating as a space for advanced teaching, learning, and the production of modern scholarship. These entities have been historically known to serve a diverse functions which include national workforce training, intellectual capital development, indigenous knowledge advancement, and the socialisation of citizenry (Holland, 2005; Hallinger and Lu, 2013; Hazelkorn and Gibson, 2017; Mintz, 2019).

However, the Vietnamese academy, like other higher education institutions in varying global contexts, has to function in the realities post-COVID world—with the novelties, fears, and unpredictability as noted earlier. Online and mobile learning have been implemented within Vietnam in response to the pandemic to varying degrees of success and failure based on a range of factors (Bui et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2020; Pham and Ho, 2020). Meeting the challenges of this new epoch, may require a reconsideration of the values which underpin higher education institutions, in addition to the value creation which occurs within and through these spaces all the same. Instructional practices are only part of the value creation process and an expression of particular values in a broader sense.

The university classroom environment in Vietnam has been characterised by local experts as one which rewards and reinforces problematics such as teacher-centric instruction and limited learner autonomy and motivation (Tran, 2013b; Dang and Glewwe, 2018; Tran and Marginson, 2018). However, local academics have been calling for more research which gives greater

priority to student perspectives, rather than a top-down approach to addressing these issues (Tran, 2020). While the insights of Vietnamese higher education scholars published before the pandemic were valuable in their own right, the issues and implications of their work are more pertinent in light of the post-COVID realities which offer untold challenges and opportunities. However, key ideas raised by these scholars explicitly and/or implicitly raise questions of value for the higher education ecosystem at large in Vietnam and its corresponding impact on local society.

Higher Education in Vietnam in the Post-COVID World

While the nation has made significant strides in the advancement of all levels of education, including tertiary level study in particular (Le and Hayden, 2017; Tran and Marginson, 2018), there yet remains the worldwide issue of colleges and universities adapting to meet the shifts of the post-COVID world, while reconciling ongoing stagnancies from the previous century up until this present time (Tran, 2013a; Peters, 2017; Fischetti, 2019; Zaphir, 2019). For example, the neoliberalisation of the academy globally threatens its continued relevance and cogency as a sustainable institution fundamental to any working modern society (Kettunen et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2016; Lederman, 2019; Roderick, 2019).

Issues of relevance and cogency are ultimately matters of value in so far as it relates to how meaning is generated, negotiated, sustained, and operationalised in practical or tangible terms. The neoliberalisation and internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam has presented its own issues in terms of the quality of education provided to students, issues of social inequality, and the overall cost-benefit of higher education as it should function to advance national interests and directives (Obaidul et al., 2016; Phan and Doan, 2020).

In another example, given Vietnam's attempt to modernise and internationalise its education system to make it a much more competitive, collaborative, and innovative environment, English language learning has proven to be a major barrier to this effort as students appear to have very little incentive to engage second language acquisition and the corresponding disciplinary benefits to be derived from having access to alternative streams of knowledge (Ashwill, 2020; Minh, 2020). Furthermore, this is part of a much broader pattern of decreasing language proficiency among the nation's students (Phan, 2019; Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen and Duong, 2020), which is also connected to the outputs of local higher education institutions in terms of limited human capital development and capacity building (Tran, 2013b; Dang et al., 2013; Pham, 2013; Duong, 2019; Kataoka et al., 2020).

Local colleges and universities in this space are faced with the challenge of producing the necessary intellectual manpower to address longstanding and emerging challenges within Vietnamese society (Fitzgerald et al., 2016; McMillan et al., 2016), since local issues are not adequately addressed by

foreign educational models, particularly Western ones. While local scholars have noted that Vietnamese people have a history of adaptability on one hand (Le, 2014; Nguyen, 2016), on the other hand, the import of foreign solutions and models to treat with the unique character of the education-based social issues has done little mitigate the far-reaching effects of such challenges (Nguyen and Vu, 2015; Tran et al., 2017; Le et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

The creation of value by higher education institutions under the shifting demands of the socio-historic condition of Modernity provides both tensions and opportunities for addressing local and regional issues considering the sociological function of higher education. Moreover, the post-COVID realities of late modernity only serve to accentuate the importance of values and value creation in this context. Instructional practices are but one part of a larger system of connections and convergences, however practices of teaching and learning can never be separated from notions of value. Issues related to the Vietnamese higher education ecosystem and other situated contexts will perhaps be forever altered by the reality and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, what also becomes evident, I argue, is that a reassessment of the value of the academy, its processes, and outcomes are useful in navigating a way forward.

Moreover, by means of addressing social issues related to higher education by first engaging with notions of value, Vietnam and other nations increase the likelihood of building greater workforce capacity by better educating local graduates, better utilising the skills of foreign graduates, opening avenues for more robust forms of socially responsible citizenship and hopefully, reduce human capital limitations. So, while appropriate instructional practices are worth considering, even more so are notions related to value and value creation which underpin such practices.

Further questions raised in reflecting upon Vietnam's place in the post-COVID world include: How might local practices of teaching and learning be affected with the return of so many foreign-educated expatriates? In addition to this, how might Vietnamese higher education institutions equip current and future students with a sense of resilience and relevance for the post-COVID world? These questions and more will only be answered in time to come as this new epoch reinforces the certainty of uncertainty. While these questions have been raised in relation to Vietnam, they are also relevant to other national environments and higher education ecosystems, with answers to be found in these situated contexts.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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